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Heather Apollonio
University of Cape Town

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Cobern Street: Excavations at an Unmarked Burial Ground in Cape Town, South Africa

Heather Apollonio, Department of Archaeology, University of Cape Town

Editor's Note: While A-A A is dedicated to African-American archaeology, material related to broader comparative and interpretive contexts will also appear on a regular basis.

In recent years, urban expansion and development in the Cape Town area has led to the rediscovery of a considerable number of historic burial grounds (c.f. Cox and Sealy 1997; Hart and Halkett 1996; and Sealy et al 1993). Perhaps the most significant discovery was of a relatively intact burial ground at Cobern Street, Cape Town, dating to the mid-18th century.

In 1994, construction work on the margins of the Cape Town City Bowl began to reveal human skeletal material. A rescue operation was initiated by the Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology at the University of Cape Town (UCT), under the direction of Alan Morris. Nine graves were exhumed from the exposed foundation trench, two of which were no more than isolated and disarticulated bones. Consequently, it was decided that systematic excavation was necessary in the portion of the site to be disturbed during construction. Alan Morris, with Dave Halkett and Tim Hart of the Archaeology Contracts Office at UCT and a group of volunteers, undertook the exhumations during December 1994 and January 1995.

Excavations revealed an additional 56 intact graves, along with additional disarticulated skeletal material. In all, the remains of approximately 121 individuals were recovered (Constant and Louw 1997). Undoubtedly, more burials remain undisturbed beneath nearby standing structures at the site.

There were three styles of interment associated with the Cobern Street burials. The earliest graves were two Later Stone Age (LSA) cairn burials, each containing two individuals. The bodies were interred in a confined shaft, one above the other in a vertical flexed position. Within the cairns, flaked stones, grindstones, shells, ochre, pottery, faunal remains, fragments of a tortoise carapace bowl, and a cache of shells were recovered. These burials dated to approximately 1000 BP, and are unrelated to the later historic period burials at the site.

The predominant burial pattern for colonial period remains appears to represent traditionally Euro-Christian burial practices in which the graves were oriented on an East to West orientation. At Cobern Street, these were frequently, but not always, coffin burials in which the body has been interred in a supine position with the arms folded over the pelvis or lying at the sides of the body. Many included shroud pins, and a few of the burials were rich in grave goods.

The third style of interment was "deep lying side burials." Five burials fit into this category, two of which were niche burials. The bodies were interred lying on their right sides with no coffin or other burial items, and were oriented perpendicular to the majority of the coffin burials. The niche burials had small alcoves cut into the side of the grave shaft for the head and the feet. These burials are among the deepest at the site, and some are overlain by coffin burials.

Finally, there were a number of highly disturbed burials consisting mostly of semi-articulated or disarticulated skeletal material. These bone deposits had little or no contextual material and often appeared to be the result of older burials being disturbed to make room for more recent interments. It is possible that this phenomenon may be partially attributed to hasty and frequent interments during the smallpox epidemics dating to 1755 and/or 1812-13 (Davids 1984). Alternatively, they may represent disturbance of graves resulting from mid-19th century construction.

Artifacts recovered at Cobern Street have been grouped into five categories: coffin hardware; clothing items; burial items such as shroud pins and fabric associated with the interment process; personal items such as beads, pipes, knives, a needle case, and a snuff box, all apparently added to accompany the deceased; and items associated with the LSA cairns.

Several of the graves were unusual, and are worthy of a more detailed description. One grave (Burial 3) contained a young man of about 20 years of age, who had been interred with an iron shackle around his left leg. Another grave (Burial 20) contained three individuals, a man, woman and a child. Both adults had filed teeth. A 40 year old man (Burial 49), with sharpened incisors, was interred in a coffin with assorted grave goods (pins, tinderbox, striker, flint, and a clay pipe).

Interpretation of the burial patterns and grave goods is currently underway (Apollonio in prep.) and promises to shed new light on groups poorly represented in the archaeological record of Cape Town. The site appears to contain the remains of individuals who were denied access to the official church burial ground of the period. Slaves, free blacks, convicts, soldiers and sailors, may all have found what turned out to be a temporary resting place at Cobern Street. If this proves to be the case, we will have an opportunity to begin to understand people traditionally overlooked in the history of colonial Cape Town.

Acknowledgements

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